

By Chris Mckenna Times Herald-Record Published: 2:00 AM - 06/17/10

Rep. John Hall is hailing two recent steps to speed the approval of disability pay for injured veterans — a process that can last months or even years.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has shortened and simplified its 23-page application form, cutting it to 10 pages, and given vets the ability to bypass a time-consuming review period by giving the agency all necessary medical and service records at the outset.

Hall, D-Dover Plains, who leads a House subcommittee in charge of disability pay and has crusaded against the government's backlog of pending claims, called the improvements incremental steps toward providing "a quick and accurate resolution of every veteran's claims."

Lorraine Conklin, senior deputy director of the Orange County Veterans' Service Agency, said the innovation most likely to reduce the wait for veterans is a new form that lets them certify that their applications for disability pay are "fully developed," which means they have given the agency all the documents it needs to decide on their case. She expects that to fast-track those cases.

The shorter application will help, too, but mainly for veterans who apply on their own; agencies such as hers that help vets file disability claims have gotten used to the 23-page form.

"To us, it's not that cumbersome," she said. "But for a veteran doing it alone, it can be quite cumbersome."

Nationwide, about a half-million disability claims are pending, excluding those on appeal, Hall said. Of those cases awaiting action, about 137,000 have been on hold for more than four months, he said.

cmckenna@th-record.com

<http://www.recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100617/NEWS/6170311/-1/NEWS>